

MYSTERY

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Entertainment	Movies	<i>Steven Vail</i>	2
	Theater	<i>Mike Madrid</i>	8
	Books	<i>Tom Seligson</i>	10
	TV	<i>Mike Madrid</i>	15
	Interview with Harlan Ellison		17
	Death Took the Call by Michael Croft		20
	Solar Pons and the Adventure of the Bishop's Companion		
	by August Derleth		29
	The Bank Job by Edward D. Hoch		43
	The Getaway by Gil Brewer		58
	To Kill A Man by Jack Ritchie		67
	Killing Bernstein by Harlan Ellison		79
	Consolation by Ed McBain		90
	The Crime Lab by George O'Toole		119
	Puzzles		124
	Contest		127

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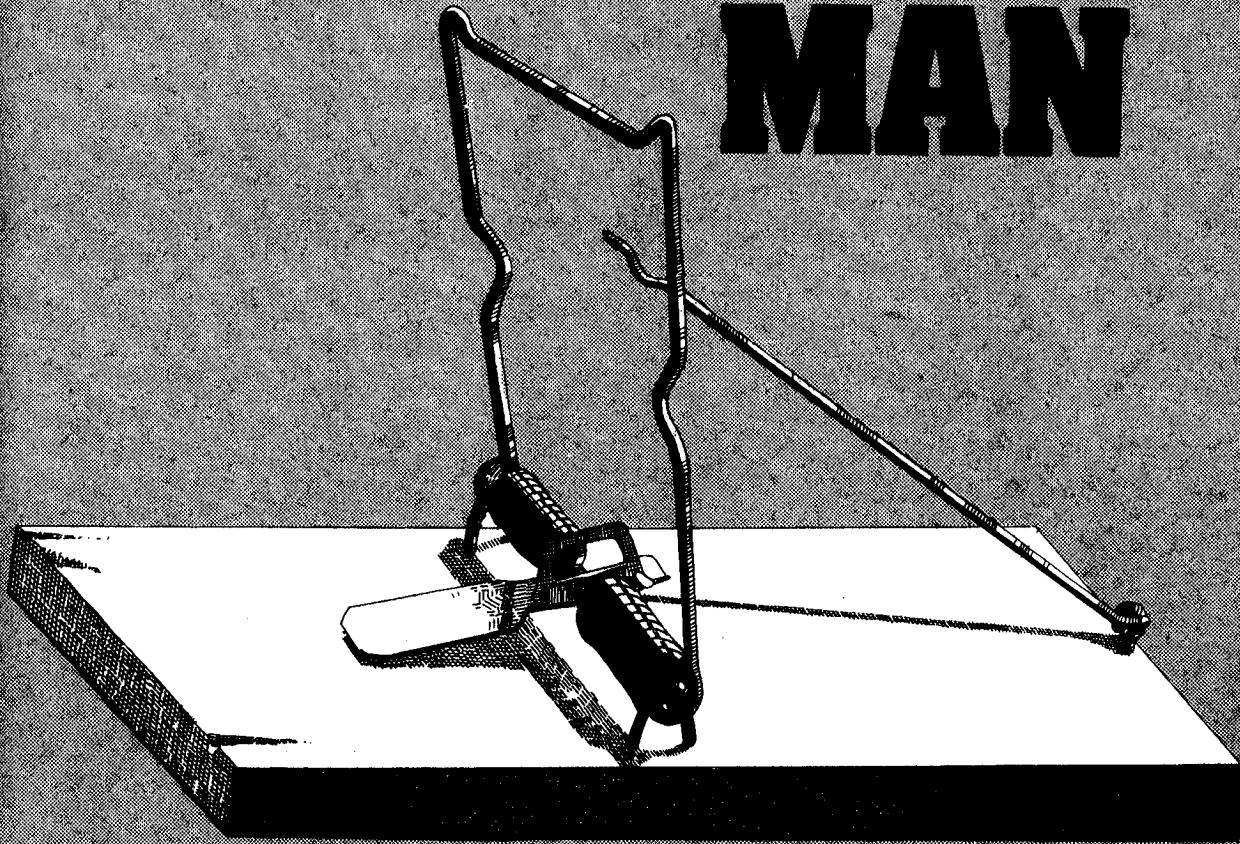
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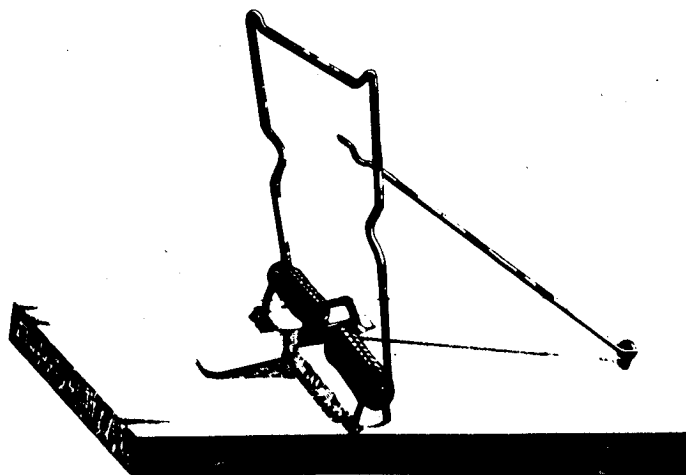
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TO KILL A MAN



by Jack Ritchie



Willie burrowed through the contents of the trunk and pressed two points on the bottom panel. The cover of a small compartment sprang open, displaying a compact automatic. Sure it was only a .25-caliber, but Willie knew only too well what it could do.

Willie Stevens stepped out of the warm Papeete sun. His eyes searched the big room and found Moore at the bar.

Yes, Willie thought, there he is. Five years haven't changed him. Not at all.

Moore's attention seemed to be drawn to a sly-eyed girl at one of the small tables with a French sailor.

Willie didn't give the French sailor much of a chance if Moore decided to move in.

Willie lit a cigarette and it needed three matches to do the job. He took a couple of deep drags and then moved between the tables to the bar. He ordered a whiskey and soda and that made Moore turn to look at him.

Moore stared at Willie for half a minute and then things registered. "I'll be damned," he said softly. "It's Willie, the little rich bastard."

"That's right," Willie said. He made a smile. "It's a small world."

Moore grinned slowly. "So you got out of the hospital, did you, Willie?"

"Yes," Willie said, "I got out."

Moore's eyes went back to the girl in the red and white *pareu*. "What the hell brings you way out here, Willie?"

"Just taking a trip," Willie said, and then added: "I mean I'm on my honeymoon and I guess you just naturally think of going to a place like Tahiti."

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He picked up his drink. "And you?"

Moore shrugged. "This and that. I'm in no hurry to go anywhere. Right now I got a little schooner and do some trading on the islands. Copra, vanilla. Where's your bride, Willie?"

"I left her next door looking at some shell jewelry." Willie rubbed at the scar across the fingers of his left hand. "How long have you been here?"

"Maybe a year." Moore's eyes went back to the dark-haired girl. "And a different one almost every night."

Yes, Willie thought, he hasn't changed.

Willie caught a reflection in the bar mirror and turned.

Laura had just come in. She was tall and slim and her eyes were cool, cool. But she could smile if you paid her.

Now she smiled and came to the bar.

"Laura," Willie said, "This is. . . ." He hesitated, suddenly realizing that he didn't even know Moore's first name. It had always been *Sergeant* Moore and nothing else. "Moore," Willie said.

Moore supplied the first name. "Call me Danny."

He and Laura stared at each other openly as Willie had known they would.

"You did well for yourself, Willie," Moore said. "Real well."

Willie nodded. Yes, when you have money, you can do a lot of things for yourself. But even then he had been lucky to find Laura. There weren't many like her. Not many at all.

He glanced at his watch. "I'll go over to the hotel and see if our luggage has been picked up from the dock. I should be right back."

Outside, peaked red-roofed wooden buildings lined the principal street along the waterfront. Here yachts tied up stern first with their gangplanks swung ashore. Along the stone coping of the seawall, old cannon sunk into the ground served as mooring bits.

At the hotel he found their suitcases and trunks stacked in the lobby. He registered and followed the dark-skinned bellboys up to a suite of large airy rooms on the second floor.

He tipped the boys and then stepped onto the balcony overlooking Matavai Bay and the saw-toothed profile of Moorea on the horizon.

Below him passed jitneys overflowing with laughing men and women, with pigs, strings of fish, bunches of breadfruit, bananas, coconuts, and sacks of live crabs.

And the girls on bicycles, the girls on Vespas, the girls on motorcycles, the girls in automobiles. The girls as pedestrians, the girls with hibiscus thrust into

the dark clouds of their hair.

Willie went back inside and unlocked one of the trunks. He burrowed through the contents and pressed two points on the bottom panel. The cover of a small compartment sprang open and Willie removed the automatic.

It was compact, only .25-caliber, but Willie knew what it could do. He weighed the gun in his hand for a moment and then changed his mind. He put the weapon back into its compartment.

When Willie got back to the bar, Moore and Laura were gone.

The Polynesian bartender moved over to him. "They go to look over Papeete. She say you will not mind to wait."

Willie ordered a drink.

The French sailor at the table with the girl in the red and white *pareu* appeared to be getting drunk.

The girl stifled a yawn and looked Willie's way. Her dark eyes asked.

Willie quickly finished his whiskey and soda and left.

At the hotel, he had a bottle sent up to his suite. He filled a water glass, took a heavy swig, and lay down on one of the twin beds.

Willie's mind went back to the army barracks and the corporal who'd just spent a night in the beer-and-neon town at the edge of camp.

"This broad was real class," the corporal had said. "Not the five bucks and a six-pack kind. She's got her pad in the trailer camp just outside of town."

Moore had heard the words and moved over. "How much was it?"

"Thirty-five bucks."

Moore had laughed. "I never had to pay a cent for mine. I don't stand in line, either."

"So you got everything?"

Moore had laughed again. "Everything a woman wants." His eyes had rested on Willie for a moment. "Everything except money."

Was that it? Willie wondered now. Was that why Moore had made it so rough for him? Or was it just that Moore liked to lean on people? It would bring a light to his eyes.

Willie reached for the glass.

Sergeant Moore, the bull, the stud. Yes, that was his life. To Moore this one thing separated the living from the dead.

Willie closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, it was dark.

For a moment he almost panicked. He lay still. Absolutely still. He wouldn't move a finger. Not one finger.

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And then slowly he remembered where he was now.

He waited until his heartbeat steadied and then turned on the bedside lamp. It was after ten.

In the distance he could now hear the faint song-chant of the *tamure*, the wild hip-swinging dance of Tahiti.

He finished the half-empty glass of whiskey and poured more.

Laura came in after eleven. She tossed her handbag on the dresser.

"Where did you go?" Willie asked.

She shrugged. "He showed me a few places around here. We had a couple of drinks."

"That all?"

"That's all."

"What do you think of him?"

She shrugged again. "What am I supposed to think of him? I don't."

Willie watched her undress and slip into the diaphanous dressing gown. She left the room and Willie heard the shower turned on.

He got up and went to the open bathroom door. He watched her silhouette behind the frosted shower glass . . . the way she moved . . . the languorous, easy way she moved.

After a while Laura stepped out. She glanced at him over her shoulder, picked up a bath towel, and dried herself.

Willie went back into the bedroom.

Laura came out wearing the dressing gown. She slipped it off and lay down on one of the beds. "I'm tired."

"Sure," Willie said. "Sure."

She closed her eyes.

Willie picked up his glass and went out onto the balcony. He eased down into one of the lounge chairs.

Now he could hear the jukeboxes in the bars on the *quais* along the waterfront playing the latest rock from Paris.

Willie stared at the scars on the fingers of his left hand.

How old had he been when that happened? Three? Possibly younger.

He had wandered away from the nursemaid. He did not even remember her name. Just the uniform. She had been reading a magazine on a bench in the garden and he had left her.

The bank of garage doors had attracted him. One of them had been slightly open and he had stepped inside.

Had he pulled the door shut after him? Or had it swung shut and locked itself?

He couldn't remember that either and it really didn't matter.

There had been the soft click as the door closed behind him and the sudden darkness.

He remembered the growing terror. He had bumped into things. He had fallen down. He had reached out with his hand. . . .

There had been the savage click . . . the swift snap . . . and then the white-hot pain.

He had screamed and screamed and screamed.

When they finally opened the door, the nursemaid had looked at him and fainted.

The chauffeur had pried the rattrap from his fingers.

Now Willie shivered. It was getting cool out here. He rose and went back inside.

He slept fitfully that night and when he woke in the morning, Laura had finished dressing.

Her eyes went over him for a moment. "You don't look well."

"I'll be all right," Willie said. He took a hot shower and that helped some.

They went downstairs for breakfast and found Moore waiting for them in the dining room.

Today he looks like the well-dressed tourist, Willie thought. So clean, so pressed. He's even wearing cologne.

Moore grinned. "Thought I'd join you for breakfast, if you don't mind?"

"No," Willie said. "We don't mind."

At the table, Willie toyed with his breakfast.

"You don't look too good," Moore said.

"I've got a headache," Willie admitted. "Didn't sleep too well last night."

Laura patted his wrist. "You ought to be back in bed. I think you've got a fever."

Willie felt his forehead. "Well . . . maybe you're right. But I hate to spoil your day, Laura."

"Don't worry about that," Moore said. "Just get yourself some rest. I'll hire a car and take Laura for a tour of the island. Right?"

"Well," Willie said. "I guess so."

When they left, Willie ordered another cup of black coffee.

Sergeant Danny Moore.

He had been Willie's platoon sergeant during basic training, and one of his jobs had been to instruct the men on land mines and booby traps.

The mines. The traps. They had terrified Willie.

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And the day had come when Moore took the platoon into the simulated native village. One of the men with the detector located a mine buried in the sand beside a hut.

Moore had moved the rest of the platoon back to a safe distance and then his eyes had rested on Willie. "All right, soldier, it's your baby. Disarm it."

Willie had found himself sweating. He drew the bayonet from his scabbard and moved back to the hut. He wiped his moist fingers on the leg of his fatigues. He slowly knelt down and began probing the sand. Carefully. Ever so carefully, until the bayonet touched the mine.

He had licked dry lips.

There would be a small charge in this mine. Not enough to kill you or maim you, but enough to make it very unpleasant if you did something wrong.

He looked back at the platoon. Moore seemed to be smiling.

Willie wiped his hands again and bent down over the mine. He began brushing away the sand. Slowly. Cautiously. Sweat dropped from his forehead.

It took long minutes before he cleared the sand from around the mine. He picked up his bayonet and got to his feet.

"You're not done yet, soldier," Moore shouted. "Disarm it."

Willie had stared down at the mine once more. He had just begun to kneel when the bayonet slipped from his wet fingers.

It seemed like a slow dream. He saw the bayonet turn in the air. The hilt would strike first.

The mine would blow.

Willie had closed his eyes and the darkness had engulfed him.

Now Willie became aware that the waiter was staring at him. He quickly finished his coffee and went back upstairs to the suite.

The day passed . . . and others. Moore was always near.

And then the evening came when he returned to his suite from dinner alone and found the note on Laura's bed. There was just one sentence.

Moore and I are leaving together.

Laura

Willie lit a cigarette and went to the window.

Landwards the green slopes were slashed with the white and blue of the waterfalls and the scent of the wild lime trees lingered faintly in the air.

Willie took a long drag on the cigarette.

He had seen it in Moore's eyes from the very beginning—the moment Moore first looked at Laura.

She was something different to Moore. Something new. This wasn't a one-night woman. This wasn't like any of the other times.

But it wasn't love. No, Moore wasn't really capable of really loving any woman. It was *wanting* her. She had to be his. He had to have her and she had to submit.

Willie left the hotel and went to the bar where he had first met Moore.

The sloe-eyed girl who had drawn Moore's attention now sat at a table with several others. They talked among themselves, but their eyes went about the room, waiting.

Willie touched his pocket to make sure that he had not forgotten his wallet and then caught her eye. He nodded.

She smiled and came over. Later, upstairs, Willie learned that her name was Moina.

Laura came back to the hotel four days later. There were bruises on her face.

Willie stared at them for a moment. "Moore did that to you?"

She glared at him. "Who the hell else do you think?"

Willie nodded. "Anything I can do?"

"No." She looked away and then said, "Maybe a drink. A strong one."

Willie made the drink. "Was four days enough?"

"It was enough. I laughed at him when that was the last thing in the world he wanted. After a while he decided to hit me, but even that didn't do it. He'll remember me forever, no matter who he's with the next time."

"Where is he now?"

"On that schooner of his. It's tied up across from Chang's. That's where he gets his whiskey."

Willie went to the big trunk, found the automatic, and slipped it into his coat pocket. "You'll get your money after I make sure you did what you were supposed to do."

She smiled coldly. "How the hell do you expect to do that?"

"I've made arrangements."

She studied him. "Suppose I really were your wife? What would you do now?"

Willie opened the door to the hall and left.

That evening Moina sat at a table with a fat businessman.

Willie caught her eye.

She nodded, patted her customer on the wrist, and moved over to Willie at

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the bar. "He would have been a most profitable evening," she said regretfully.

Willie shrugged. "You won't be out any money. We made our agreement."

Outside, they made their way along the seawall. After a while Willie touched her arm and they moved into the shadows. Ahead of them lay Moore's schooner, tied stern to dock, gangplank run out.

Moore sat on a hatch cover, beside him a bottle. His face was stubbled with beard and he stared listlessly at the dark water.

Willie whispered into Moina's ear. "You said you slept with him before?"

"Yes. Many times."

"And he did not have to pay you?"

She laughed lightly. "A man like him does not have to pay."

"All right," Willie said. "Now go to Moore."

She hesitated. "I do not understand this at all. Why do you pay me so much to sleep with Moore?"

"You don't have to understand," Willie said. "Just do it."

She stared at him thoughtfully and then shrugged. She swayed gracefully as she walked away.

Moore looked up as she came aboard, but his face remained expressionless.

She stopped in front of him and spoke, but Willie could not hear the words. She caressed Moore's cheek with her hand.

Moore reached for the bottle and took a long drink. He got slowly to his feet and pulled Moina into the cabin.

Willie heard Moina's soft laughter as the lights dimmed.

He waited, and his thought went back to the army hospital.

Captain Peterson offered him a cigarette. "I'm replacing Major Hendricks. He's going back to his civilian practice. You don't mind if we go over your case again?"

"No," Willie said. He reached into the pocket of the wine-colored hospital robe and brought out a pack of book matches. His fingers trembled as he lit up.

"How long have you been here?" Peterson asked.

"Three years."

Peterson looked down at the open folder. "This antitank mine didn't explode?"

"No."

"But you fainted?"

Willie rubbed the side of his neck. "Yes."

Peterson turned a page. "Later you went to Sergeant Moore privately and

tried to explain to him why you had fainted? You told him about the childhood episode with the rattrap?"

Cold perspiration had once again formed on Willie's forehead. "It was a mistake. But I wanted him to know that I couldn't help fainting. I wanted him to know that except for this one thing I was as much a man as anybody."

"And later, that night in the barracks, something happened?"

"Yes," Willie said. "Something happened."

What had awakened him that night? One of the regular barracks noises? Snoring? Someone talking in his sleep?

It had been pitch dark.

He then heard the squeak of the floorboards as someone moved away from him down past the row of bunks. The door of the cadre room at the end of the barracks clicked open softly and then closed again.

Willie lay there uneasily. Something instinctive made him wary. Cautiously he had reached out a hand.

Peterson now spoke out again. "You reached out?"

"Yes, I reached out."

"The rattrap which someone had placed beside you broke two of your fingers when it sprung? That was the only physical damage?"

"Yes," Willie said. "The only physical damage."

Captain Peterson studied him.

Willie flushed. "I screamed and screamed and screamed!"

"Take it easy," Peterson said. "Take it easy." He waited half a minute.

"Sergeant Moore denied putting that trap on your bunk."

Willie glared. "Do you believe that?"

Peterson looked out of the window for a moment. "Perhaps he intended it as just a harmless practical. . . ." He gave that up and his eyes went to the notes again. "But you are improving now, aren't you? Those nightmares don't come too often now?"

"No," Willie said. "Not too often."

Peterson looked up. "Episodes like this do strange things to people."

"Yes," Willie said. "Strange things."

Peterson looked back down at the case notes. "Major Hendricks seemed to feel that besides the obvious trauma, there was something *else* bothering you."

Yes, there was something else. But Willie wasn't going to tell anyone. Not anyone at all.

"No," Willie said. "There's nothing else bothering me."

Willie had had plenty of time to think while he had been confined to the

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hospital. At first he had decided that he was going to kill Moore.

But Willie changed his mind.

Just killing Moore wouldn't be enough. It didn't even things. There had to be an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

When the hospital finally let Willie go, he went to Cooper Confidential Investigations—one of the largest detective agencies in the country.

Cooper himself became interested in Willie's needs. "Finding this Moore shouldn't be too difficult," he said. "He isn't running away from anything, is he?"

"No."

Cooper was thin, bespectacled, and probably never left his desk. "Your *second* request might be considerably more difficult to fulfill. It does, however, present rather a challenge to our firm."

"But you can do it?"

"If anyone can," Cooper said firmly, "*We* can." He made another notation in Willie's new file. "She has to be beautiful? She has to be cold? Without a heart? Without pity?"

"Yes," Willie said.

Cooper studied him. "May I ask you why you want to find such a woman as that?"

"No," Willie said, "You may not."

Cooper found Moore in two weeks. It took three months to find the kind of woman Willie wanted—lovely and dead inside.

And Willie told Laura exactly what he wanted her to do and how much he would pay her to do it, and then they left for Tahiti.

Now Willie heard the curses and Moina's scream as she fled from the cabin of Moore's schooner.

Moore appeared on the deck shouting obscenities as she ran down the gangplank.

Willie grasped Moina's arm as she was about to pass him and pulled her into the shadows.

Her eyes were wide. "Something has happened to him. He is sick in his mind. He can no longer do anything when he is with a woman. He is not able."

Willie smiled slowly. It was all he had hoped for. It was done.

His eyes went to the schooner and to Moore.

"Yes, you son of a bitch," he whispered. "Now you know what it's like. Now you know what you *really* did to me."

When Willie got back to his suite, Laura was packing.

"You did fine, Laura," he said. "Just fine." He drew the certified check from his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

She studied it. "Twenty thousand dollars to kill a man?"

"He's not dead."

"By his standards, he might as well be."

Willie took the automatic out of his pocket and put it on the dresser.

Laura smiled faintly. "What was the gun for? Were you going to put a bullet between his eyes if your little plan didn't work?"

"Yes," Willie said. He reached for the whiskey and poured a stiff drink.

It was over now. He had done it. He took a tired breath. What do I feel now? Triumphant? No. Just tired. And maybe a little sick.

Laura watched him. "I never asked you why you wanted to do this to Moore."

"Don't do it now."

"I can guess," she said. "You never touched me. But you wanted to. And somehow Moore made you that way."

"Shut up," Willie said.

She locked the suitcase on the bed. "What are you going to do now?"

Do? Willie frowned slightly. He had never really thought beyond this day.

For a moment, Willie met Laura's violet eyes.

Was there something still there? Willie wondered. Something never touched or offered?

He looked away. What damn difference does it make anyway? I couldn't do anything about it.

"Moore will get over his trouble after a while," Laura said. "Maybe a week, maybe a month. But the day will come and he'll be over it."

Willie closed his eyes. Yes, some day he'll get over it. But now he knows what it's like not to be a man and he'll always wonder whether it will happen again.

"Someday you'll get well, too, Willie," Laura said.

He opened his eyes and studied her. "If you don't have anyplace in particular to go, you can stay here with me."

She looked his way. "I couldn't promise you anything. I'll always be just like I am."

Maybe, Willie thought. Maybe.

He waited.

She stared at him and then turned away.

Slowly she began unpacking.